A Different Hunger: World spectatorship and the violence of representation

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In echoing the title of cultural theorist Ambalavaner Sivanandan's seminal investigation of the intersection of race and class in the (post) colonial historical formation, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (1991), this essay argues that colonialism's 'racialized regime of representation' (Hall 1997: 245) continues to structure and support the social production of hunger and to sustain the political operation of global poverty and inequality. Through close engagement with critiques of humanitarian practice and detailed case-study analysis of the limits of interventionist politics and aesthetics, it seeks to demonstrate how the colonial logics framing the representation of hunger are at the same time its material form of organisation. Following Sivanandan, Stuart Hall, and, more recently, Robbie Shilliam in seeing class as 'a constitutively racialized phenomenon' (2018: 4), the essay examines the co-constitution of race and class through the aesthetic-political regime of colonial-humanitarian representation and offers a critique of self-reflexively performative strategies of resistance to its theatricalizations. In particular, it investigates the questionable claims of Dutch artist Renzo Martens' performative documentary, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008), to expose the hypocrisy of Western food aid practices through the lens of performative intervention. The essay argues, in parallel to Martens, that the ideology of humanitarianism must be seen not only as being contiguous with, and an extension of, the operation of colonialism, but that it also serves 'to draw a veil over the operations of a capitalist economy and its production of inequality' (Edkins 2019: 77). The essay contends that the social construction of an intrinsically theatricalized 'humanitarian gaze' (Andersson 2014: 151) is inimical to the political functioning of colonial-capitalist ways of seeing, thereby demonstrating that critical art practices are not exempt from operating within the parameters of this aesthetic regime. In this context, Shilliam's sustained historicization of 'the racialization of the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor' as a foundational premise of Western democratic social organization is mobilised to examine the ethical and political limits of performative critique in repurposing the forms of humanitarian intervention 'constitutionalized through empire and its aftermaths' (2018: 11, 178).

In this neo-colonial 'theatre of appearing' (Mbembe 2019: 170), the emaciated figure of the suffering, silent other is continually forced to re-enact and 'relive the traumatic scene' (2019: 170) of their own destruction, disfigurement and disappearance into the space of the image in order to fulfil the spectator's material desire to see and to be reassured of the ideological ground of their own spectating. The image of suffering—typically the image of a racialized and infantilized other suffering from hunger and starvation—is circulated within a

visual economy designed not only to suffer the image to be seen but to reproduce the ideological security, political certainty and structure of feeling of the spectator position it constructs (Kear 2021: 60). Theatrically, then, the spectatorial relation is inscribed in the dialectical interplay between the materiality of distance and the illusion of proximity that continually reframe the performance of otherness as a means of producing the security and safety of the spectator's political subjectivity and cultural sensibilities. Politically, therefore, the reproduction of the logic of world spectatorship within the colonial regime of representation contributes to maintaining the global order of inequality.

Whilst the material reality of hunger presents an urgent and continuing political emergency, with circa 10% of the planetary population being malnourished in 2023 (actionagainsthunger.org), it remains imperative to locate the historical production of hunger within the neo-colonial world-system not as an exception due to "technical deficiencies" or "structural tensions" but as the effect of its normal political functioning. As political theorist Jenny Edkins has argued, the attempt to depoliticize global hunger 'as a phenomenon that has "causes"'—environmental or economic—serves to mask the modes of acting and 'forms of action' that create hunger and famine as 'the product of the system rather than of its failure' (2019: 34—5). For Edkins, 'famines happen because the social and political system is working all too well rather than because it has failed' (2019: 35). Accordingly, the biopolitics of international food security and distribution practices serve to 'endorse the permanent state of emergency that, ironically, enables the world to continue as it is' (2019: 86), with established ways of seeking to end hunger and poverty effectively functioning to ensure their reproduction. This renders the desire for humanitarian action or even geo-political change—the 'different hunger' to which Sivanandan refers—as being intrinsically implicated in the situation it seemingly seeks to challenge and redress.

Likewise, the extent to which the visual culture of humanitarianism—with its repeated positing of the figure of a passive victim in need of salvation by an actor-spectator situated outside of the frame of representation—might be exposed as being essential to its self-reflexive operation. The staging of manifest hunger in the space of the image appears to anticipate and index the 'different hunger' of the spectator's desire to imaginatively intervene into it, performatively enacting the scene of their own difference-making. Such a scenario is played out very literally in the opening sequence of Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, framing the excoriating visual experience to come. In a refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a group of humanitarian aid workers can be seen posing to photograph themselves alongside lorry-loads of UNHCR-labelled food supplies, their self-congratulatory smiles and incongruous presence seemingly disrupting the camera's documentary focus on the local people both receiving the goods and actually doing the work of distributing them. Yet this anamorphic disruption of the visual image effectively reveals its

primary concern: to document the self-serving effects of humanitarian practices, including those of the film-maker himself. Tellingly, it is the figure of Renzo Martens, 'journalist', who is introduced next. A close-up of his face as he presents his credentials to a camp guard serves to identify his visual agency, underscored by 'a reverse angle shot to represent the subjectivity of a gaze that penetrates the space, staring refugees in the eye' (Perugini and Zucconi, 2017: 26). The extent to which Martens appears as an actor—social and aesthetic—within the visual field of his own construction will be investigated later in this essay. But it is first necessary to adumbrate the modes of humanitarian discourse and practice—artistic and governmental—into which the film makes its critical intervention.

In an important book, *Whose Hunger?* (2000), Edkins demonstrates convincingly that international aid practices function to maintain scarcity and division at the same time as the humanitarian discourse of ameliorating suffering serves to naturalize and normalize the political operation of hunger as a form of governmentality. Edkins conceives governmentality in the Foucauldian mode: not as a repressive or restrictive regime, but the active production of lived social relations constructed through the interpenetration of power and the domain of living beings in which it is invested and over which it exerts control. Her work therefore situates the production of hunger as an effect of what Foucault refers to as biopower: the myriad ways in which the ensemble of the capillary actions of power constitute the interdependence of biological life and political apparatuses and create the mechanisms through which the boundary between lives that are counted as productive and lives that are deemed expendable is perpetually re-inscribed. For Foucault, the operation of biopower is what enables the categorization, subdivision, and hierarchization of forms of life and the construction and stratification of subgroups of population. Importantly, as Achille Mbembe notes, Foucault characterizes this operation 'using the familiar term "racism"' (2019: 71). Colonial biopower thereby establishes a process of 'racialization' that embeds 'racist attributes and hierarchies' in the material fabric of the 'everyday meaning and common-sense valuation' of socially lived historical experience (Shilliam 2018: 4). This process centres the intersection between the generation of racial distinctions and the constitution of class division as the locus enabling the effective functioning of the colonial-capitalist historical formation and regime of representation.

The production of hunger can therefore be seen as an act of exteriorized violence directed against specific populations in order to maintain the international order and neo-imperialist settlement designed to demarcate 'who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not' (Mbembe 2019: 80). For Mbembe, the Foucauldian terms biopower and biopolitics are insufficient to account for the historical and geo-political divisions determining the differentiation between 'those who must live and those who must die' (2019: 71) because they do not fully recognise the 'contemporary forms of subjugation

to life to the power of death' which have been optimized by racial-capitalism to create 'forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions which confer upon them the status of the living dead' (2019: 92). The terms he proposes as alternatives—necropower and necropolitics—are intended to demonstrate the (neo)colonial inversion of the priority of life over death, 'as if life were merely death's medium' (2019: 38). Necropolitical power is exercised as the power to determine the utility and disposability of racialized groups of human beings as material to be worn out, used up, discarded and disregarded; as having value only in either their exploitability and exhaustibility by colonial-capitalism economically; or by functioning symbolically in its regime of representation as 'abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of "superfluous humanity"' (2017: 3).

In this respect, Edkins' possessory question, 'Whose Hunger?', is therefore deliberately doubled: asking not only who benefits from hunger and famine on the ground at the level of social instrumentality, economic profit, and political expediency; but whose appetite for political domination and self-aggrandizing claim to be enacting social change is grounded in the theatricalizing frame and desiring machine of the humanitarian world stage. Reflecting on this question in a later book, *Change and the Politics of Certainty* (2019), Edkins notes that *Whose Hunger?* (2000) 'asked whose hunger was in question: the hunger of those without food, or the hunger of academics – and western intellectuals in particular – for non-existent answers and the security and certainty of a better world' (2019: 4). For Edkins, the desire to act to change the world is symptomatic of a power/knowledge position coextensive with the desire to exercise control and domination over it. Indeed, the very grammar of subject and object constructs an artificial separation between the world and the spectator cum would-be actor somehow standing outside of it. The optics of this illusory configuration position the spectator as being able to observe the world from an Olympian height and critical distance in order to imagine a transformative intervention into it. Such a fantasy of world spectatorship reveals a very specific philosophical attitude and political viewpoint that both centres the subject as having the power to decide to act upon the world, determining what is to be done, at the same time as marginalizing other points of view and minimizing the capacities of other actors to do anything other than appear within it. In the theatricalized dynamics of this scenario, 'they are in the world; we are above it'; occupying the security of distance and vicarious knowledge. Situated as spectators to proxy actors, the luxury of 'seeing ourselves in a privileged position outside the world looking in, somehow superior and equipped to bring about change' (Edkins 2019: 2) masks the fact that in acting out a desire to change the world we are principally performing a virtue-signalling dissatisfaction with its unyielding recalcitrance and resistance to alteration.

Following Edkins, it is important to caution against positioning hunger as an object outside reflexive critical consideration of it. There is no simple 'out there' of material reality

that pre-exists our imagination and desire to know; no objective correlate for our hunger for social and political change. In order to understand this 'different hunger', we must recognize our differential implication in, and relation to, the world in which hunger is manifest and not construct an idealized optic that would allow us to act as spectators upon it, or to fantasize about our capacity to change the world in a way that only conceals our inability to do so (2019: 3). As Aimé Césaire reminds us, 'life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, and a man [*sic*] who wails is not a dancing bear' (2001 [1939]). Academics, artists and activists are part of the world not separate from it – and we cannot hold the world at a remove from us either as an image of atrocity, object of study, or theatrical *mise-en-scène.* Rather than seek to occupy a position of world spectatorship which grounds the spectator as 'enjoying the safety of one's own standpoint' and centres the security of theoretical distance over experiential engagement (Blumenberg 1997: 26), or to attempt to look away from the world as a performative expression of dissatisfaction and despair at its injustices, it might be useful to recast world spectatorship as 'a kind of looking which takes place *in* the world, and *for* the world' (Silverman 2000: 3). Such a re-conceptualization enables ocular practice and visual agency to be regarded as a mode of participating in and bringing to light subjective co-presence without endlessly repeating the colonial regime of representation's production of 'type-images' that 'turn something violently into nothing' (Mbembe 2019: 47, 139). World spectatorship could in this respect be seen to provide a counterpoint to the racialized theatre of representation and its 'act of epistemic violence' (Bhabha 1986: xii) through the strategic separation and 'systematic stigmatization' of the space of appearance (Mbembe 2017: 33).

At the same time, it is worth recalling that for Fanon, the very construction of the image-spectator relation—the frame of the racialized actor's appearance as Other to another—is at the heart of the colonial formation's mode of knowledge production and inscription of the lived experience of racism. The appearance of the black body in the space of representation is always, to this extent, a mimetic reduplication of appearance in the 'place of the other'—on the stage constructed by the racialized regime of representation and the gaze of the white spectator—which normalizes, naturalizes and produces the spectator's whiteness as its effect (Kear 2021: 64). For Fanon, the violence of representation—the disfiguration of both being made to act as a surrogate for a whole 'race' and having to 'meet the white man's eyes' in order to confirm his own degradation and attenuation to a racialized field of vision—is experienced as 'an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood' (1986: 33). Tellingly, Fanon is here not referring to specific representations of colonial violence—for example the photographic images of amputated hands in the Congo 'that shaped early conceptions of human rights abuses' and the visual lexicon of colonial atrocity (Twomey 2012: 39)—but to the violence of representation itself.

To the extent that Fanon situates the 'act of epistemic violence' of the racializing mode of theatricalization within the dynamics of the colonial deformation and its governing regime of representation, he also regards it as being only a contingent, 'deformed way of being in the world … and eminently "dispensable" (Muppidi 2009: 152). Imbricated within a spectatorial relation of non-relation and 'over-determined from without', the figure of the colonized is staged as 'the eternal victim' of a performative construction, 'of an appearance for which he [*sic*] is not responsible' (Fanon 1986: 33). Accordingly, for Himadeep Muppidi, this means that 'to read Fanon is to read and understand – see – the self as it appears on one side or the other of a colonially organized world. Reading Fanon then cannot but be a reading/seeing of the coloniality or post-coloniality of one's body and its embeddedness in contemporary international relations' (2009: 159).

Recalling Fanon therefore confronts us with, and makes us confront, the persistence of the politics of spectatorship within this global 'theatre of appearing', and its perpetual reanimation of 'the traumatic scene, as if yesterday's nightmare was suddenly repeating, being reproduced in the reality of the present (Mbembe 2019: 170). It requires us to examine how the logic of world spectatorship continues to operate within a racialized regime of representation; to investigate how seeing suffering and suffering seeing not only 'ruins but renews our desire to see'; and to account for how the very act of spectating 'infects our gaze, meaning that our gaze is devastated' by the recognition of its violence but nonetheless 'holds on, resists, returns,' and continually repeats (Didi-Huberman 2003: 278). In other words, if world spectatorship figures a mode of looking that takes place in the world, not just upon it, it is important to recall that the world in which it takes place is nonetheless already constituted through the racialized ways of seeing of the colonial regime of representation and renews itself through their repetition. Is it possible, then, to imagine world spectatorship as not only a condition of being in the world, but as a mode of acting politically within and for it, as Silverman suggests? Does this not constitute precisely the vicarious fantasy of intervention that Edkins cautions against, a compensatory and consolatory structure of feeling produced by the theatrical interplay of material distance and illusory proximity, felt empathetically as 'the imperative to *do something*'? (2019: 6)

In *Change and the Politics of Certainty* (2019), Edkins argues that critical attention needs to be paid to what those trying to do something about famine and hunger are actually doing, not just what they claim to be doing. Her focus is on examining the material practice of humanitarianism, not simply its discursive configuration, foregrounding how humanitarian actions serve to ameliorate, obscure and support the operations of racial capitalism and close down political contestation. Her analysis demonstrates that the production of hunger must be seen as a deliberate political choice not a natural occurrence, and that famines 'happen because particular people take particular forms of action' when other decisions

could have been made and other actions taken (2019: 34). Also challenging the role of the audience in sustaining the fantasy of humanitarian intervention and supporting the logic of state sovereignty it maintains, Edkins wonders ‘what could be done if we were to give up on the idea of making the world a better place’? (2019: 75), no longer seeking to satiate the different hunger driving the desire for action that appears to perpetuate the material conditions for poverty and inequality. For Edkins, the ideology of humanitarian intervention and the politics of global food distribution must be seen as an extension of the neo-colonial settlement enabling global governance and the reproduction of the combined, unequal and hierarchical world order. She argues that the humanitarian approach to treating suffering, hungry people as ‘victims of famines expected to be passive recipients of aid’ and bare ‘lives to be saved’ denies them ‘a political voice’ and recognition of historical specificity and social subjectivity (2019: 80—81). This effectively seeks to place hunger outside of politics, the exception to rather than part of the contemporary field of racialized injustice produced by sovereign power: the necropolitical power to decide who must live, who may die; who might be saved, and who can be discarded. By appearing to neutralize the politics of the production of hunger, and the correlative ‘politics of disposable life’ (Vergès 2021: 16), humanitarianism’s logic of salvation and humanitarian agencies’ contrapuntal concrete actions tacitly reinforce the political sovereignty of both neo-colonial state formations and neo-liberal racial capitalism. As Edkins explains, in seeking to take the politics out of the situation, humanitarian intervention effectively normalizes its operation.

In *Whose Hunger?* (2000), Edkins demonstrates that global hunger and famine ‘is not something that just happens’ but is a socially, historically and politically constructed event – ‘even, in some cases, a deliberate act akin to genocide’ or war (Edkins 2019: 34). Similarly, Camilla Orjuela and Swati Parashar (2021) situate ‘deliberate mass starvation’ as a crime whose violence is often rendered invisible and silenced in the gendered and racialized regime of representation sustained by humanitarian discourses and necropolitical modes of operation that feminize and infantilize the global south. They examine hunger as being a form of “slow violence” whose materiality resists or works against the grain of representation by not being reducible to visible spectacle or temporally bound event, even in those instances when the visual image itself ‘cuts across time and discloses a cross-section of the event or events which were developing at that instant’ (Berger 1995: 120), such as the singular moment captured in the atrocity photograph. As Rob Nixon, who coined the term “slow violence” explains, this a form of violence that ‘occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across space and time, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’. In contrast to the normative frame that conceives violence ‘as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space and as erupting into instant sensational visibility’, “slow violence” is a

violence that ‘is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous implications playing out across a range of temporal scales’ (2011: 2).

The emphasis on long duration and dispersed topographical effects enables the concept of “slow violence” to describe the social and ecological impacts of both climate catastrophe and extractive global capitalism. Because “slow violence” is not readily represented as a singular occurrence or event, its presence is less likely to be made visible by being reported in the media or codified and condensed in a single photograph, notwithstanding the capacity of the image to demonstrate the ‘interconnectedness and related coexistence of events’ (Berger 1995: 120). The human and environmental ‘casualties of slow violence’, as Nixon puts it, ‘are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted. Casualties of slow violence become light-weight, disposable casualties’ (2011: 16), rendered superfluous by global capitalism’s extractive economy and left abandoned by its practices of mediatization. Accordingly, Orjuela and Parashar seek to mobilise “slow violence” as a spatial concept to examine the ‘geography of violence’ of hunger as a mode of global governmentality, recognizing in the ‘extended temporalities’ of famine a normalization of geopolitical choice and criminal responsibility articulated as natural inevitability. Like Edkins, they regard the event moment of famine as effectively exposing the everyday working and granular operation of global capitalism, bringing to culmination a ‘series of politico-social-economic processes that move from dearth through famishment to morbidity’ (Edkins 2019: 171) and are only rendered visible in the last instance as visual spectacle.

The ‘relative invisibility of slow violence’ (Nixon 2011: 2) presents a significant challenge to representational, narrative, and documentary practices seeking to engage in attesting to the material reality of famine crimes and contesting the biopolitics of poverty of hunger. Firstly, any attempt to mark the slow violence of hunger must begin with the recognition that hunger operates at the limit point of representation—resisting the theatricality of showing and seeing—and perhaps in the process demonstrating the limits of representation as a material social practice and mode of aesthetic-political intervention. This requires us to re-examine what is made visible and rendered invisible by theatrical forms of thinking and performative modes of presentation, duration, enactment, and event. Secondly, acknowledgement of the slow violence of hunger necessitates engagement with its materiality as an absence marked in as well as upon and by embodied physical presence—'the pressing presence to an organism of the absence of sustenance’ (Cozzi 1999: 121)—which opens up questions about the relationship between absence and presence, embodiment and enactment, presentation and representation that constitutes the material ground of performance. Accordingly, performance practices foregrounding durational acts of ‘self-starvation’ have been seen to offer ‘extended and expressive’ resistance to the (de-)

subjectivating effects of biopolitical power whilst testifying to its ‘absent presence’ (Anderson 2004: 821; 2010). This indexes how the slow violence of hunger as an intentional act—whether directed against people and populations as a form of governmentality (as in famine crimes), or by people against their political situation and modes of subjectivation (as in hunger strikes)—doesn’t conform to an event-based temporality or logic of visibility. For the hunger artist, the gradual disappearance of the body itself stages the political re-appearance and realization of the slow violence of representation. Thirdly, whilst stressing the impossibility of any truly ‘just’ theatrical representation of the slow violence of hunger—not least because its material presentation resists mediation and symbolic representation—might we follow Enzo Cozzi in seeking in performance practice the possibility of doing justice to the fundamental injustice of hunger? How might the work of performance-making bear some weight of responsibility for the perpetuation of slow hunger, and for the disposable and discarded casualties of slow violence, without simply abstracting and appropriating suffering as the material for articulating the different hunger of our desire for change and providing the disappearing ground of its visualisation? Approaching these questions requires us to recognize our own implication in the modes of address and structures of feeling that sustain global hunger and maintain world spectatorship as an aesthetic-political condition. Any attempt to explicate the slow violence of hunger through the dynamics of performance therefore necessitates the practising the “slow thought” that Les Back describes as paying critical ‘attention to the implication of our most intimate and local experiences in planetary networks and relationships’ (2013: 22). Only then, by addressing the ethics of dramatization as extraction; accepting the political limits of practices of representation; and attending to the reimagining of world spectatorship as a mode of redress against being viewed as disposable life and means of making visible ‘existing alternatives to contemporary forms of power’, might performance contribute towards enacting what Jenny Edkins terms the “slow justice” of remaking of the world without indulging the epistemological ‘fantasy that we can *know* what justice, or indeed the world, might be’ (2019: 211—14).

Questioning the ethics of intellectual engagement and critical practice seems essential if we are to avoid attenuating the reality of global hunger and over-extending an aesthetic-political claim what performance can do. Perhaps this requires, as Ariella Azoulay has argued, an active ‘unlearning’ of the colonial regime of representation and ‘a rejection of imperialism’s conceptual apparatus altogether’ (2019a: 43). At the very least it engenders a commitment not to reproduce its operation and to decolonize performance as a mode of knowledge production. Otherwise, the same structure simply repeats. As Mbembe succinctly recounts: ‘colony, neocolony, postcolony … it is all the same theatre, the same mimetic games, with different actors and spectators (and sometimes not even!), but the same convulsions and the same abuses’ (2021: 92—93). The tendency to stage its return is

exemplified by Renzo Martens' performative documentary, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008). In this deeply problematic and ethically troubling text, Martens self-consciously presents himself as an actor playing himself within his own documentary artwork. The film follows his carefully constructed persona of activist artist undertaking a neo-colonial expedition to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to expose the hypocrisy and counterproductive socio-economic practices of humanitarian aid organizations and embedded media agencies. A white man in a white shirt, he appears throughout as the animating presence of the film, determined to pursue his desire to expose a desperate situation and disclose the need for radical change. With 'the camera trained on his own face in an insistent act of self-reflexive exposure and criticality' (Demos 2013: 111), Martens continuously performs the role of himself as artist—or perhaps *actor*-artist, bearing in mind that he is simply playing himself, taking the focus as the self-involved 'actor that he *is*' (Vande Veire 2019: 87)—in order to draw attention to the insufficiency of the artistic intervention and its implication in perpetuating the excesses and reproducing the structures of the neo-colonial violence it is ostensibly critiquing.

Martens' performance—alternating between a parody of Werner Herzog's fictional Fitzcarraldo in seeking to bring art to the jungle and a pastiche of Joseph Beuys in advocating the artistic construction of reality from whatever resources are ready to hand—is set within the frame of a documentary practice that expropriates the reality of the poverty and suffering it presents in the service of its own creation. In seeking to demonstrate that art-making is 'consistent with the very same global arrangements that structure the inequalities of humanitarianism and the media' (Demos 2013: 109), the film acknowledges its complicity in instigating as well as revealing the events it captures and records. Whilst Martens sees this as positioning the work in relation to what it is depicting, the internalized logic of critical art practice appears to offer inadequate justification for knowingly enacting 'the very regime of visibility his film seeks to disparage' (Pernecsky 2019: 167). As such, the film appears as a weak form of critique, as weak as the politics of the humanitarian practices it aims to expose. In this regard, it offers an indictment of the inter-relationship between artistic and humanitarian approaches to countering injustice, recognising in their commonality an ethically and politically limited attempt to simply 'relieve injustice by disclosing it' (Koster 2019: 274). By staging himself as the figure of the artist-explorer-activist, Martens not only accepts the role of neo-colonial actor described by Azoulay as being 'built in to the position of the artist in the West' (2019b: 291), but seeks to inhabit it as a privileged space in which to express the relative 'inconsequentiality of our own critical practice' (Koster 2019: 274) and self-indulgent claims to be making a difference.

Martens appears to take the logic of this further in seeking to demonstrate how, in the neo-liberal conjunction, 'art practices are increasingly called upon to agitate for social

change and alleviate injustices in the name of democracy, equality and human rights' (Downey 2019b: 232). *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, theatricalizes the relationship between artistic and humanitarian activism and neo-liberal capitalism in a relentless and remorseless coruscation of 'every form of representation it encounters including the making of the film itself' (O'Kane 2019: 74) at the same time as seemingly conceding that it can only autocritique the problem by locating itself in global networks of production, circulation and consumption. Martens himself contends that that the work 'doesn't so much comment on an outside economy, which is the economy of image-making', in the form of the international media industry responsible for the traffic in images of suffering and degradation, but is primarily concerned with explicating 'its own medium' (Pinto 2019: 91). Such modernist self-absorption cuts little ice ethically as even a weak justification for the work's extractive practices, given any serious reflection on the politics of documentary form must take cognizance of the responsibilities of representation and dramatization. Whilst Martens is surely right in concluding that 'the film is not about the Congo at all, but about the power relations between those watching and those being watched' (Pinto 2019: 91)—the politics of world spectating—this is not sufficient to obfuscate the relations of power operative within the film itself. Casting himself as an aberrant artist-actor examining the conditions facing Congolese plantation workers may implicate his character in the ways of seeing structuring the situation, enabling him to embody and indict our role as spectators as co-creators of the images of suffering he shows being produced, but it does not excuse the apparent lack of care shown to the participants in his project. Perhaps this is just another way of framing the slow violence and narcissism of the ethics of humanitarian intervention and world spectatorship exposed in the film, through which 'the developed West is effectively getting back from the victimized Third World its own message in its true form' (Žizek 2005: np). The subjects of the documentary are rendered disposable and seemingly discarded within its own terms of engagement and mode of practice, both in order to reflexively frame the grounding of the spectator as the necropolitical effect of representation and to expose the hypocrisy of documentary ethics and humanitarian aesthetics.

The apparent glibness of this approach is reflected in the composition of the film itself. The protagonist begins his journey into the Congolese 'heart of darkness' (the direct comparisons with Conrad's Kurtz are self-evident) accompanied by an entourage of local 'porters' carrying a heavy trunk containing his visual artwork. As they move through the swampy jungle, Martens hums the Paul Young song 'A Man Needs a Maid' (1972) under his breath before it breaks out as a non-diegetic soundtrack. The direct reference to the syntagmatic structure of the film itself makes clear that Martens' knowing incorporation the narcissistic fantasy of vicarious identification with service workers into the material reality of a scene of more-or-less forced labour acts as a violent re-assertion of his own desire to be

seen as an independent and purposeful actor in the world. At this point the sublation of the local workers' hunger into his—the 'different hunger' of the actor-spectator's desire for recognition, for the security of identity and meaningful action—becomes painfully clear. Continuing onto the village, Martens admits to himself that in this moment of self-reflexive recognition 'it was cold, and it rained, and I felt like an actor' (Vande Veire 2019: 87). Once there, the bearers are put to work constructing a scaffold upon which the artwork is then mounted: a neon sign spelling out the simple message of the film, 'ENJOY please POVERTY', powered by a manually attended generator. The meaning is double-valent, suggesting both that the poor should be allowed to benefit from exploiting their own impoverishment like everyone else seems to (the ostensible argument of the film, acting against humanitarianism); and that the audience for whom it is actually intended—the distant audience of the art-world, safely installed within, and culturally enriched by, the galleries and theatres of the West—should find entertainment or vicarious *jouissance* in the critical explication of the continued deployment of images of destitution and suffering for artistic gain (the demonstrative intention of the film, arguing against any claim to the political efficacy of the aesthetic as engendering social change). That the sign itself is written in English indicates that the latter overdetermines the logic of the events witnessed, not least as Martens has to translate it for an inquisitive and querulous villager who really does not appear to apprehend or appreciate the point he is making. 'The experience of your suffering makes me a better person,' Martens explains. 'You're really doing me a favour, merci beaucoup' (Vande Veire 2019: 84).

The atmosphere of bemusement continues as the villagers are invited to party under the sign of the reification and abstraction of their own destitution. The proposition is, as Antony Downey neatly summarises, 'a preposterous, insulting solution for those affected by it: enjoy your poverty; treat it as a resource, everyone else is' (2019a: 26). Whilst the villagers have appeared to assume that the party presages the arrival of assistance and relief aid, they are left empty-handed by Martens' vacuous *promesse de bonheur*. The artistic project is thereby revealed as homologous with the humanitarian interventions it sets out to critique, abandoning its bearers to the flickering chimera of the efficacy of the aesthetic (Koster 2019: 281). This is a recurring pattern in *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, with each attempt Martens makes to teach his Congolese collaborators how to use the image of their poverty as a resource to be sold back to the West ending not only in abject failure but scandalous betrayal. Later in the film, having previously persuaded the owners of an indigenous photography business that it would be more profitable for them to take images of people suffering, like the international press core photographers do, than getting married or having birthday parties, Martens takes them to share the photographs they have since taken with the local director of Médicins Sans Frontières in the hope of agreeing access to their

facilities in order to take more. The director flatly rejects the proposal as a sick joke, insisting 'I'm not here to make an exhibit of their misery …' unlike either Martens or the other Western photographers with whom they willingly co-operate (Azoulay 2019b: 294—5). The suspicion remains that the statement masks a dissatisfaction with the formal quality of the images themselves, made without either the sophisticated training and equipment of the professional photographers or, more importantly, the apparatus affirming and endorsing what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms the colonial 'right to look' (2011). The rejected protégées appear deflated as the realisation dawns that the whole gambit is designed to exclude them by including only their image, not their images, making them serve as the artist's double negative of the poor's disenfranchisement from playing a role as political actors and world spectators in their own right.

Forcing the disappearance of the subject into the space of the image is a central feature of the slow violence of representation. As Mbembe explains, 'the whole game of representations under colonialism consisted in turning the natives into a variety of type-images' (2019: 47) in order to pursue their disfigurement in an 'act of devastation' which reveals representation as 'a will to destruction aiming to turn something violently into nothing' (2019: 139). The explication of the continuation of this colonial practice of representation within the aesthetic regime of humanitarianism is doubtless the objective of *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, and Martens relentlessly insists on the implication of his own project—and the aspirations of socially engaged critical art practice more generally—within its necropolitical apparatus. The film's abandonment of the dispossessed to appearing as disposable within and through its frame can be seen to simply reflect the operation of the visual economy and regime of representation it investigates. Yet this comes as a heavy cost to those subjected to its exposure of the neo-colonial humanitarian gaze. In one particularly distressing scene that resonates across the structure of the film, Martens accompanies the local MSF agent to visit a Congolese plantation worker, living on less than half a dollar a day as an indentured 'day labourer', and his children, who are listed as being 'malnourished'. The man complains that his daughter never sleeps because she is constantly in pain, and he shows Martens and the camera her distended, sore-encrusted body. As Azoulay powerfully puts it, 'a scandalous image is being registered. An image that ought not to have existed. One doesn't want to be there' (2019b: 289) and the inclination is to look away. Must the spectator witness this 'unforgiveable pain', or does the recording of the image contribute to and reduplicate the child's suffering, endlessly repeating the indignity of her visual violation? For Azoulay, 'the camera, the director, cannot make the image that ought not to exist disappear', and as a result she maintains that 'it is not the image that ought not to happen, it's the scandalous existence of plantation labour' (201b9: 289). She is right, of course, but at the same time the child's disappearance into the space of the image, her enclosure within

the repetitious violence of representation, is as much part of the economy of exploitation and extraction as the neo-colonial operation of the plantation.

Elsewhere, Azoulay herself has argued convincingly that the photographic image needs to be read in the context of the political relations not only operative within the context of its making but formed in the moment of its viewing. In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), she claims that the people captured within the frame of the image are present primarily as an index of the historicity of its making and yet remain 'still present there at the time I'm watching them' (2008: 16). In recognising the ethical dynamics of this extended temporality, she seeks to 'anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped being "there"' so as to enable a 'rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship' (2008: 17). Whilst this situates the spectator as having responsibility for recognising what the image wants—the demand for justice it places upon us—it also necessitates acknowledgement of the specificity of the reality that has 'seared the subject' (Benjamin 1999 [1929]: 510) and rendered their personhood irreducible to the aesthetic form of the image. In this context, the artwork's relation to constructing the 'civil position' of the spectator (Azoulay 2008: 18) cannot be predicated solely on the incorporation of the abject image of the starving child into its orthogonal address. To see its function as framing 'a new space of observation and action' (2008: 375) for the spectator to occupy and claim as the ground of their own political subjectivation risks reinforcing the humanitarian framework of world spectating that underscores the neo-liberal global formation. And it would be precisely to repeat the gesture that *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* so painstakingly demonstrates: the aesthetic fallacy and epistemic violence of attenuating the material reality of hunger as mere nourishment for our self-affirming desire to make the world a better place.

Accordingly, Azoulay credits Martens with having created a 'cinematic diary recording processes of unlearning' (2019b: 291) the humanitarian framework underscoring methodologies of documentary practice which evidences the need to move away from the perpetuation of neo-colonial ways of seeing and tendentious aesthetic-political claims to be producing transformative social change. Yet the risk of this approach appears to reside in continuing to centre the artist-spectator as the main protagonist and key political actor in a practice of making (or process of unmaking) conducted primarily under their own self-direction. Such a configuration seems to repeat some of the core dynamics of humanitarian aesthetic-political production, notably: the individualist assumption of the autonomous actor and their capacity to act in an efficacious manner; the perpetuation of category distinctions between actor and spectator, artist and image, subject and object that mirror racialized global divisions between rich and poor, deserving and undeserving, citizen and slave/other; and the biopolitical construction of 'human being as an independently existing and uniquely valuable form of life' (Edkins 2019: 90) as the reverse index of its necropolitical disposability.

Rather than focus exclusively on reading Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, as a relentless exposition of the need to give up the vainglorious desire to change the world through humanitarian aesthetic-political intervention, we should pay equal attention to the specific situations and concrete inter-relations it produces and enacts. After all, Martens' self-conscious construction of the artist-actor as the central figure of the film and his performative framing of acting as the mode of its composition seems to have direct consequences for those involved in its action. The photographers he betrays, the villagers he confounds, and the plantation-worker's malnourished children he abandons all have cause to claim it would be better for him to simply stop acting than continue to play with their lives as his material. Whilst the ostensible political claim of Martens' film is to explicate the 'different hunger' of the humanitarian activist and to excoriate all artistic 'grand fantasies of changing the world' for being both self-serving and 'irrelevant' (Edkins 2019: 88), the ethics of his performative documentary practice raise another set of problematics. Perhaps the photographers, porters, plantation workers, villagers and children that appear in the film are acting too, actively participating in its construction of a visible fiction, but the film singularly resists according them such creative agency. They appear within it as acted upon rather than existing as political actors in their own right. To the extent that their presence serves to authenticate the reality of the world represented, the space of acting *per se* appears uniquely reserved for Martens as the locus of his occupation of neo-colonial ways of seeing and performative practices of whiteness.

Perhaps the injunction to stop acting might be extended across the theatricalizing frame of the humanitarian project, so as to stop reproducing the same structures of injustice and exclusion and their correlative relations of power, authority and visibility. Stop acting. Stop having to play all the parts. Stop taking centre stage. Stop narrativizing the fantasy and learn to traverse it. As Edkins puts it, 'we can't help changing the world, all the time' (2019: 88) because we are always-already in it and of it. Perhaps, as this essay has suggested, to stop acting might also mean to stop acting out the theatricalizing fiction of the desire for transformative change. Perhaps, too, as it has demonstrated, the epistemic shift away from the figure of the actor might enable a refocusing of critical attention on the material effects of the concrete actions undertaken in and by the work of performance-making, ensuring a situated *ethics of practice* is regarded as co-constitutive of a work's politics and aesthetics. Perhaps, then, as this essay has argued, a critical reassessment of the cultural politics of acting and the desire to act might contribute to the reanimation of performance as a space for crafting the 'slow, small, careful actions' through which we 'make and remake the world' (Edkins 2019: 89) and world spectatorship, and for patiently developing small acts of redress against the injustices of global capitalism and the slow violence of representation.

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